

[top page](#)

The Great Learning 大學

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Table of Contents

A. [The Text](#)

B. [The Traditional Commentary, Attributed to Confucius, Through the Transmission of Cengzi](#)

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A. The Text

[1] 大學之道、在明明德、在親民、在止於至善。

The way of great learning consists in manifesting one's bright virtue, consists in loving the people, consists in stopping in perfect goodness.

[2] 知止而后有定、

When you know where to stop, you have stability.

定而后能靜、

When you have stability, you can be tranquil.

靜而后能安、

When you are tranquil, you can be at ease.

安而后能慮、

When you are at ease, you can deliberate.

慮而后能得。

When you can deliberate you can attain your aims.

[3] 物有本末、事有終始。知所先後則近道矣。

Things have their roots and branches, affairs have their end and beginning. When you know what comes first and what comes last, then you are near the Way.

[4] 古之欲明明德於天下者、先治其國。

The ancients who wanted to manifest their bright virtue to all in the world first governed well their own states.

欲治其國者先齊其家。

Wanting to govern well their states, they first harmonized their own clans.

欲齊其家者先脩其身。

Wanting to harmonize their own clan, they first cultivated themselves.

欲脩其身者先正其心。

Wanting to cultivate themselves, they first corrected their minds.

欲正其心者先誠其意。

Wanting to correct their minds, they first made their wills sincere.

欲誠其意者先致其知。

Wanting to make their wills sincere, they first extended their knowledge.

致知在格物。

Extension of knowledge consists of the investigation of things.

[5] 物格而后知至。

When things are investigated, knowledge is extended.

知至而后意誠。

When knowledge is extended, the will becomes sincere.

意誠而后心正。

When the will is sincere, the mind is correct.

心正而后身脩。

When the mind is correct, the self is cultivated.

身脩而后家齊。

When the self is cultivated, the clan is harmonized.

家齊而后國治。

When the clan is harmonized, the country is well governed.

國治而后天下平。

When the country is well governed, there will be peace throughout the land.

[6] 自天子以至於庶人、壹是皆以脩身爲本。

From the king down to the common people, all must regard the cultivation of the self as the most essential thing.

[7] 其本亂而未治者、否矣。其所厚者薄、而其所薄者厚、未之有也。此謂知本、此謂知之至也。

It is impossible to have a situation wherein the essentials are in disorder, and the externals are well-managed. You simply cannot take the essential things as superficial, and the superficial things as essential. This is called, “Knowing the root.” This is called “The extension of knowledge.”

B. The Traditional Commentary, Attributed to Confucius, Through the Transmission of Cengzi

3. 所謂誠其意者、毋自欺也。如惡惡臭、如好好色。此之謂自謙、故君子必慎其獨也。

3. “Making the will sincere,” means “no self-deception.” Like when we allow ourselves to be disgusted by a bad smell or become infatuated with an attractive appearance. This is called “self-satisfaction.” Therefore the Superior Man must be watchful over himself when he is alone.

小人閑居爲不善、無所不至。見君子而後厭然。掩其不善、而著其善。人之視己、如見其肺肝然、則何益矣。此謂誠於中、形於外。故君子必慎其獨也。

When the inferior man is at leisure, there is no limit to the extent of his evil. But when he sees a Superior Man he will be ashamed; he will cover his evil and show his goodness. When people observe you, they see right to your core. So what's the use of being deceitful? Therefore we say: “internal sincerity expresses itself outwardly.” Therefore the Superior Man must be watchful over himself when he is alone.

曾子曰。「十目所視、十手所指、其嚴乎。」富潤屋、德潤身。心廣體胖。故君子必誠其意。

Cengzi said, “What ten eyes see, what ten fingers indicate, is this not to be taken seriously? Rich land makes a house luxurious, virtue makes a person shine; when the mind is expands, the body is enriched. Therefore the Superior Man must make his will sincere.”

4. 『詩』云。「瞻彼淇澳、萋竹猗猗。有斐君子、如切如磋、如琢如磨。瑟兮僩兮、赫兮喧兮。有斐君子、終不可諠兮。」「如切如磋」者、道學也、「如琢如磨」者、自修也、「瑟兮僩兮」者、恂慄也、「赫兮喧兮」者、威儀也、「有斐君子、終不可諠兮」「者、道盛德至善、民之不能忘也。」『詩』云。「於戲前王不忘。」君子賢其賢而親其親、小人樂其樂而利其利、此以沒世不忘也。

4. The *Book of Odes* also says,

Look at the bend in the Qi River,

And how green and luxuriant the bamboo trees are there!

Here is our refined prince,

Who is like a gem cut and filed,

Carved and polished!

How dignified he is, and how awesome!

How majestic and distinguished!

Our illustrious prince will never be forgotten.

“Like a gem cut and filed” refers to the way of study. “Like a gem carved and polished” refers to self-cultivation. “How dignified and awesome,” refers to a cautious respect. “How majestic and distinguished,” refers to his awe-inspiring way of handling himself. “Our illustrious prince will never be forgotten,” means that the Dao flourishes in him and his virtue reaches excellence, hence, the people will be unable to forget him.

The *Book of Odes* also says, “Aah, the ancient kings are not forgotten!” The Superior Man treats the worthy as worthy and loves his family. The inferior man enjoys his enjoyment and grabs profit whenever he has a chance. It is in this way that they are not forgotten after their death.

5. 『康誥』曰。「克明德。」『太甲』曰。「顧諟天之明命。」『帝典』曰。「克明峻德。」皆自明也。

5. In the *Kang Report* it is said, “He was able to manifest his virtue.”

The *Taijia* ¹ says, “He contemplated Heaven's unveiled mandate.”

The *Canon of Yao* says, “he was able to manifest his lofty virtue.”

6. 湯之盤銘曰。「苟日新、日日新、又日新。」『康誥』曰。「作新民。」『詩』曰。「周雖舊邦、其命惟新。」是故君子無所不用其極。

6. The inscription of the bath of King Tang said, “If you renew yourself for one day, you can renew yourself daily, and continue to do so.”

In the *Kang Report* it says, “Carry out the renewal of the people.”

The *Book of Odes* says, “Even though Zhou was an ancient state, its mandate was sustained anew.” Therefore there is nothing in which the Superior Man does not fully exert himself.

7. 『詩』云。「邦畿千里、惟民所止。」『詩』云。「緡蠻黃鳥、止于丘隅。」子曰。「於止、知其所止、可以人而不如鳥乎。」『詩』云。「穆穆文王、於緝熙敬止。」爲人君、止於仁、爲人臣、止於敬、爲人子、止於孝、爲人父、止於慈、與國人交、止於信。

7. The *Book of Odes* says, “The people only stay (comfortably) in a state where there is security.”

The *Book of Odes* also says, “The chirping bird only rests in the wooded part of the hill.” The Master said, “When it rests, it knows where to rest. Can a person possibly be unequal to a bird?”

The *Book of Odes* also says, “How sublime was King Wen! He abode in clear, shining reverence.” As a ruler, he abode in humaneness; as a minister, he abode in reverence; as a son, he abode in filial piety; as a father, he abode in loving compassion, and in his interactions with the people of the land, he abode in trustworthiness.

8. 子曰。「聽訟、吾猶人也。必也使無訟乎。」 無情者不得盡其辭。大畏民志。此謂知本。

8. Confucius said, “In hearing legal cases I am just like anyone else. What we really need is to not have legal cases.”

Those who lack sincerity should not be allowed to speak on and on. They should also have a great awe for the will of the people. This is called knowing the basis.

9. 所謂修身在正其心者。身有所忿懣、則不得其正、有所恐懼、則不得其正、有所好樂、則不得其正、有所憂患、則不得其正。心不在焉、視而不見、聽而不聞、食而不知其味。此謂修身在正其心。

9. “The cultivation of the person lies in the correction of the mind.”

When you are angry, you cannot be correct. When you are frightened, you cannot be correct; when there is something you desire, you cannot be correct; when there is something you are anxious about, you cannot be correct. When the mind is not present, we look, but do not see. We listen, but do not hear; we eat, but don't taste our food. This is the meaning of “the cultivation of the person lies in the correction of the mind.”

10. 所謂齊其家在修其身者。人之其所親愛而辟焉、之其所賤惡而辟焉、之其所畏敬而辟焉、之其所哀矜而辟焉、之其所敖惰而辟焉。故好而知其惡、惡而知其美者、天下鮮矣。筆諺有之曰。「人莫知其子之惡、莫知其苗之碩。」此謂身不修不可以齊其家。

10. “The regulation of the family lies in the cultivation of the person.”

When there is someone you love, you are biased. When there is someone you hate, you are biased. When there is someone you are in awe of, you are biased. When there is someone you pity, you are biased. When you are lazy, you are biased. Those who love someone and yet know their bad points, or who hate someone and yet know their good points, are few and far between. Hence there is the proverb: “The man does not know of his own son's evil, or the richness of his own corn.”

This shows that if you do not cultivate yourself, you cannot regulate your family.

11. 所謂治國必先齊其家者、其家不可教而能教人者、無之。故君子不出家而成教於國。孝者、所以事君也、弟者、所以事長也、慈者、所以使衆也。『康誥』曰。「如保赤子」、心誠求之、雖不中不遠矣。未有學養子而後嫁者也。一家仁、一國興仁、一家讓、一國興讓、一人貪戾、一國作亂。其機如此。此謂一言僨事、一人定國。堯、舜率天下以仁、而民從之。桀、紂率天下以暴、而民從之、其所令反其所好、而民不從。是故君子有諸己而後求諸人、無諸己而後非諸人。所藏乎身不恕、而能喻諸人者、未之有也。故治國在齊其家。『詩』云。「桃之夭夭、其葉蓁蓁、之子于歸、宜其家人。」宜其家人、而後可以教國人。『詩』云。「宜兄宜弟。」宜兄宜弟、而後可以教國人。『詩』云。「其儀不忒、正是四國。」其爲父子兄弟足法、而後民法之也。此謂治國在齊其家。

11. “Before governing the country, you must first regulate your family.”

There has never been a case where a man could not educate his own family, and yet could educate others. Therefore the Superior man perfects the education for the country without leaving his own home. Filial piety is the means by which you

serve your ruler. Fraternal submission is the means by which you serve your elders. Compassion is the means by which you deal with everyone.

The “Announcement of Kang” says: “It is like a mother completely giving herself to the care of her baby.” She may not be perfect, but she won't be far off, even though she never took a course on child-rearing before having the baby.

When one family becomes humane, the whole country will be stimulated to humane. When one family becomes easy to get along with, all the people in the country are stimulated to become easy to get along with. If one man greedily upsets things, the whole country can be plunged into chaos. *Its function is really like this.* Hence there is the saying “one word can win the whole affair, one man can settle the whole kingdom.” Yao and Shun led the realm by humaneness and the people submitted to them. Jie and Zhou led the realm with aggression, and the people submitted to them, but did not go along with laws that they didn't like.

The Superior Man looks for good in others only after possessing it in himself. He negates the evil in others only after ridding it from himself. There has never been a case where a person was able to teach others the things he had learned, if he lacked a sense of reciprocity 恕. Therefore, the governing of the country lies in the regulation of the family.

The *Book of Odes* says: “The peach-tree so ripe, its leaves so luxuriant. The girl is going to her husband's house, and she will harmonize the household.” Once the household is harmonized, the people of the realm can be taught.

The *Book of Odes* says: “He treated his elder brothers right, he treated his younger brothers right.” If you can treat your brothers right, then you can teach your countrymen.

The *Book of Odes* says: “His manner unchanging, he rectifies his whole state.” Only when the ruler has actualized the harmonious relationships of father/son, elder brother/younger brother in himself will the people take him as a model. Thus, it is said: “The ability to govern the country lies in harmonizing the family.”

12. 所謂平天下在治其國者。上老老而民興孝、上長長而民興弟、上恤孤而民不倍、是以君子有絜矩之道也。所惡於上、毋以使下、所惡於下、毋以事上、所惡於前、毋以先後、所惡於後、毋以從前、所惡於右、毋以交於左、所惡於左、毋以交於右。此之謂絜矩之道。『詩』云。「樂只君子、民之父母。」民之所好好之、民之所惡惡之、此之謂民之父母。『詩』云。「節彼南山、維石巖巖。赫赫師尹、民具爾瞻。」有國者不可以不慎、辟則爲天下戮矣。

12. “Bringing peace to the realm lies in the ability to govern the country.”

If you respect the aged, the people will be encouraged to be filial. If you respect your elders, the people will be stimulated to respect their elders. If you pity the weak and defenseless, the people won't hurt them. Therefore the Superior Man has a Way of Correcting. What he hates in his superiors, he does not give to his inferiors. What he hates in those below him, he does not pass up to those above him. What he hates in those who are in front, he does not pass on to those behind; what he hates in those behind, he does not pass on to those in front. What he hates on the right, he doesn't transfer to the left. What he hates on the left, he doesn't transfer to the right. This is his Way of Correcting. The *Book of Odes* says:

How wonderful is the prince!

The parent of the people.

What the people likes, he likes. What the people hate, he hates. Thus he is called “the parent of the people.”

The *Book of Odes* says:

How high, the Southern Peaks

The cragged rocks jutting in the air.

Magnificent is the Teacher Yin;

All look up to you!

He who possesses the country must be prudent. If he errs, he will be the embarrassment of the realm.

13. 『詩』云。「殷之未喪師、克配上帝。儀監于殷、峻命不易。」道得衆則得國、失衆則失國。是故君子先慎乎德。有德此有人、有人此有土、有土此有財、有財此有用。德者本也、財者末也、外本內末、爭民施奪。是故財聚則民散、財散則民聚。是故言悖而出者、亦悖而入、貨悖而入者、亦悖而出。『康誥』曰。「惟命不于常。」道善則得之、不善則失之矣。楚書曰。「楚國無以爲寶、惟善以爲寶。」舅犯曰。「亡人無以爲寶、仁親以爲寶。」

13. The *Book of Odes* says:

Before the Yin lost its teachers

They could appeal directly to the Lord on High.

Learn from the Yin:

The lofty mandate is not easy to maintain.

The Way is to win the people, then win the country. If you lose the people, you lose the country. Therefore the ruler must be concerned about his own virtue first. If he has virtue, he will have the people. If he has the people, he will have the land. If he has the land, he will have wealth. If he has wealth, he will be able to function.

Thus, virtue is the “root” and wealth is the “branches.” If you put the roots outside and the branches inside, you will struggle against your people, and make them grab for anything they can. If you gather the wealth, you will scatter the people. If you scatter the wealth, you will gather the people. Therefore, the wrong words going out will result in the wrong words coming back in. Wealth taken wrongly will also leave wrongly. The “Announcement of Kang” says:

Even destiny is not changeable, since

When our ways are good

We obtain it.

When our ways are not good

We lose it.

The *Ch'u Record* says:

The state of Ch'u does not treasure that.

It treasures its good men.

Uncle Fan (maternal uncle to a prince in exile) said:

Our exiled prince has no treasure.

To be good to his parents is his only treasure.

14. 『秦誓』曰。「若有一介臣、斷斷兮無他技、其心休休焉、其如有容焉。人之有技、若己有之、人之彥聖、其心好之、不啻若自其口出。實能容之、以能保我子孫黎民、尚亦 有利哉。人之有技、媚嫉以惡之、人之彥聖、而違之俾不通。實不能容、以不能保我子孫黎民、亦曰殆哉。」唯仁人放流之、迸諸四夷、不與同中國、此謂唯仁人爲 能愛人、能惡人。見賢而不能舉、舉而不能先、命也、見不善而不能退、退而不能遠、過也。好人之所惡、惡人之所好、是謂拂人之性、災必逮夫身。是故君子有大 道、必忠信以得之、驕泰以失之。

14. The “Oath of Ch'in” says:

I would like to have just one decisive man, without all kinds of specific abilities, whose mind was broad and easy, such that he could utilize the talents of others as if they were his own. Finding sages, he would sincerely love them with his heart, and not just give them lip-service. By being able to accept and utilize everyone in this way, he would be ensuring safety for me, my sons, grandsons and all the people. Wouldn't the benefits be great? But what can you do when you have a man who gets jealous of the abilities of others and hates them? When he hates the sagely, creates disturbances for them and keeps them from advancing? Since he cannot protect me, my son, grandsons or the common people, isn't he quite dangerous?

Only a man of *ren* can banish such a minister and send him out to live with the barbarian tribes away from the middle kingdoms. Thus the saying: “Only the *ren* man can love people and hate people.” ²

To see a worthy and be incapable of promoting him; to promote him, but not to the top — this is avoiding responsibility. To see someone evil and not remove him; or to remove him, but not completely get rid of him — this is a fatal error.

To love that which the people hate, and hate that which the people love: this is to ignore human nature, and you are sure to bring great harm to yourself. Therefore the ruler attains the Great Way through loyalty and trust, and loses it with pride and arrogance.

15. 生財有大道。生之者衆、食之者寡、爲之者疾、用之者舒、則財恆足矣。仁者以財發身、不仁者以身發財。未有上好仁而下不好義者也、未有好義其事不終者也、未有府庫財非其財者也。

15. There is also a clear Way for the production of wealth. When producers are many and consumers are few; when production is rapid and use is slow, then there will always be enough. The *ren* man expends his wealth to expand himself. Lacking *ren*, one expends himself to expand his wealth.

There is no such case where those in power loved *ren* and those below disliked Justice. And there is no case where a man loves Justice and is not thorough in his work. In this situation, there are no treasure houses in the state which do not belong to the ruler.

16. 孟獻子曰。「畜馬乘、不察於雞豚、伐冰之家、不畜牛羊、百乘之家、不畜聚斂之臣。與其有聚斂之臣、寧有盜臣。」此謂國不以利爲利、以義爲利也。長國家而務財用者、必自小人矣。彼爲善之、小人之使爲國家、災害并至。雖有善者、亦無如之何矣。此謂國不以利爲利、以義爲利也。

16. Meng Xianzi said:

The man who keeps horses and chariots

Does not look after chickens and pigs.

The family that stores ice³

Does not raise cattle and sheep.

A hundred-chariot clan

Does not keep a tax-collector.

If they are going to have a tax-collector,

They might just as well have a thug.

Thus, the saying: “A state does not benefit by profiteering, it benefits by its Justice.”

One who rules a state or a clan who sacrifices himself to wealth and its usage must be under the influence of an inferior man. He may regard him as good, but if this man handles the affairs of the state or clan, calamities from Heaven and harm from men will be visited upon him. Even if a good man is finally found, what can he do? Thus the saying: “A state does not benefit from profiteering, it benefits from Justice.”

Notes

1. 太甲 The title of a section of the *Shujing* 書經. The name of the founding emperor of the Shang 商 (Yin 殷) dynasty.

2. This saying can be found in *Analects* 4:3.

3. The procurement and storage of ice in ancient times was extremely difficult, and therefore an expensive proposition.